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Forgetting in the Ground of Kitsch and Falling with Kundera and Heidegger

Abstract

In this paper we will try to show relation between phenomenon of kitsch and phenomenon of falling (Das Verfallen) and through that the phenomenon of forgetting in everydayness of human life. The phenomenon of kitsch we shall analyse through the work of novelist Milan Kundera (1929–) and his novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1984). We will try to show, with the help of method of comparison and synthesis, that Kundera's view on kitsch as a phenomenon that helps forgetting the face of death gets its philosophical conformation in the phenomenon of falling introduced by Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) in his work Being and Time (1927). Finally, we will try to explicate, on the one hand, connections and interrelations of an art piece such as novel and a philosophical system through the mentioned phenomena. On the other hand, we will try to show that the phenomenon that comes into present through kitsch and falling is phenomenon of forgetting death. If kitsch and falling are something in human life that is closest and nearest, as Heidegger and Kundera claim, the leading question of our investigation is throwing itself before us: is forgetting death fundamental moment of everydayness?

Key words

forgetting, death, kitsch, falling, everydayness, Martin Heidegger, Milan Kundera

Introduction

In this paper we will try to show the relation between the phenomenon of kitsch and the phenomenon of falling (*Das Verfallen*) and through that the phenomenon of forgetting in everydayness of human life. We shall analyse the phenomenon of kitsch through the work of the novelist Milan Kundera (1929–) and his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). In it we recognize two levels of kitsch: individual and social. First, kitsch is showing itself at level of everyday decisions of an individual, who passively accepts what community sets as good and valuable and in doing so missing a chance for authentic life. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* through its main actors Tomas, Tereza and Sabina, with regard on the relation towards kitsch and recognizing its influence in their lives, develops two worldviews: the first is shaped with kitsch which everything that is undesired destroys, and the other worldview accepts real problems of life and takes a responsible approach toward them. The above mentioned Kundera's heroes go through their lives as every normal human being: they socialize with different kinds of people, have an active relation with art and a specific relation towards the political party at power – they live all that in a way Kundera describes as kitsch. But, beneath

the surface of kitsch there is a hidden fear of death. On the other side, on the community level, kitsch is observed in two different spheres. In the first, kitsch is a tool of all political parties and socialites, but in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* communism is in the main focus. In the second sphere, one that is broader, kitsch is like an ideology that has been enforced in the West since the very beginning, since the Bible, specifically Genesis, according to which the world was created properly, human existence is good and that we are therefore entitled to multiply. Human belief that everything what is created is good by itself, Kundera names a categorical agreement with being. Everything that disturbs that agreement is deadly and has a smell of death. As such it is undesirable and forgotten – even death itself.

We will try to show, through comparison and synthesis, that Kundera's view on kitsch as a phenomenon that helps in forgetting the face of death gets its philosophical confirmation with the phenomenon of falling introduced by Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) through his work *Being and Time* (1927).

The phenomena such as idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity have served Heidegger to show the everyday manner of Dasein. With above mentioned phenomena, a ground existential characteristic of everydayness of human life is showed – the falling of a human person. Dasein is fallen from himself into the world of the Others, in the world that is governed by the Others. Heidegger thinks that this everydayness is throughout the history of philosophy again and again being passed over in explicating Dasein. For Heidegger Others or *das Man* (“the they”) take care that humans live full and fruitful lives. Humans are in that way moved away from their own possibilities. In the phenomenon of falling humans live inauthentic lives. The very reason for falling is crucial for our investigation: for Heidegger humans are aware of the face of death and that is why they run from that knowledge into oblivion and live inauthentic lives in everyday manner.

The end of this paper, on the one hand, is to show connection and interrelations of an art piece such as a novel and a philosophical system through mentioned kitsch and falling. On the other hand side, we will try to show that the phenomenon which comes into the present through kitsch and falling is the phenomenon of forgetting death. If kitsch and falling are in a human life something that is closest and nearest, as Heidegger and Kundera claim, but having in mind that we are not describing two sides of one phenomenon, the leading question of our investigation is throwing itself before us: is the forgetting of death a fundamental moment of everydayness?

Kitsch as an aesthetic phenomenon that goes through boundaries of the ethical and metaphysical

What makes kitsch¹ kitsch in the novels of Milan Kundera? How does kitsch, at the first glance grasped as a lower form of art, introduce itself in the lives of the protagonists of Kundera's novels? Can kitsch and the beautiful be brought in connection of aesthetic shaping of our everydayness and moral decisions?² Is kitsch, which creates aesthetic scars on hands,³ in that way becoming a border separating us from true art or a border connecting us with true art? Who can judge what kitsch is and what is not kitsch and point at kitsch-people?⁴

Categorical agreement with being

For Kundera, as we have already said, in the ground of all political and religious systems we can find traces of Genesis that are fundamental for the system itself. According to Genesis, the world is created just as it should be,

everything that is created is good and existence is itself good. Kundera names it a categorical agreement with being. But, there are still things and behaviours that are not accepted. This is how the fundamental problem is born: how to reconcile the categorical agreement and things that we are ashamed of or that are not morally acceptable? Kundera claims that it is a moment when kitsch comes into existence. Its role is to remove and get rid of everything that is opposite to the categorical agreement and to enable humans to act as though it did not exist. “Kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.”⁵ This is precisely is the fundamental way of kitsch, which will show itself through the lives of protagonists of Kundera’s novel. That which is not reconcilable with our bodily created nature must be removed because it is a proof of our mortality.⁶ So kitsch takes a role of a remover of the phenomenon of death from everydayness.

Worth mentioning here is the similarity of view of Kundera with Hermann Broch, who sees in the Christian-Platonic picture of world the value dogma of the West which is based in the Middle Ages, and which was “in its totality and in the time of its greatest success closest to absolute liberation of death.”⁷ All art and human achievement strives for this absolute liberation of death and in it serves the value dogma of the West.⁸ Question that is forthcoming to us asks: which phenomenon is showing its face when some system takes control and deliberates an individual from the face of death?

1

Kundera claims that the word ‘kitsch’ was born “in the middle of the senti-mental nineteenth century, and from German it entered all Western languages”. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, London 1999, p. 92. Dorfles thinks that etymologically the word ‘kitsch’ can come from the English word sketch and according to some other writers it came from the German verb *etwas verkitschen* – *etwas billig losschlagen*, according to *Knaursche-Konversations Lexiconu*. Ludwig Giesz, author of one of best works on kitsch (*Phänomenologie des Kitsches, ein Betrag zur antropologischen Aesthetik*, Rothe Verl, Heidelberg 1960), claims that kitsch can be very suitable for naming ‘garbage art’. (Gillo Dorfles (ed.), *Kič – antologija lošeg ukusa*, Golden marketing, Zagreb 1997, p. 22. English translation: Gillo Dorfles (ed.), *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, Universe Books, London 1969. All notes that are not originally in English are translated by the author.) Giesz also claims that it is not correct that every bad artwork is kitsch, because some artworks are just failures. (Ludwig Giesz, “Kič čovjek kao turist” [Kitschman as tourist], in: G. Dorfles (ed.), *Kič – antologija lošeg ukusa*, p. 161.) One of main theoreticians of kitsch, Hermann Broch holds that the word ‘kitsch’ was born in München. (Hermann Broch, “Umjetnost i njezin ne-stil svršetkom XIX. Stoljeća” [Art and Its Non-style at the End of the XIXth Century], in: Hermann Broch, *Duh i duh vremena* [*Spirit and Spirit of Time*], Antibarbarus, Zagreb 2007, p. 117).

2

James S. Hans, “Kundera’s Laws of Beauty”, in: Harold Bloom (ed.), *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Milan Kundera*, Chelsea House Pub., Broomall 2003, pp. 75–93, here p. 75.

3

G. Dorfles (ed.), *Kič – antologija lošeg ukusa*, p. 23.

4

Kitsch-Mensch (kitsch-people) is a term that represents “a user of bad taste or a way that people of bad taste comprehend, experience or relate to an artwork (whether it is good or bad).” G. Dorfles (ed.), *Kič – antologija lošeg ukusa*, p. 26. *Kitsch-Mensch* is also used by Giesz, but the creator is Hermann Broch (“Einige Bemerkungen zum problem des Kitsches”, in: *Dichten und Erkennen*, sv. 1., Zürich, p. 295.)

5

M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 92.

6

J. S. Hans, “Kundera’s Laws of Beauty”, p. 83.

7

Hermann Broch, “Zlo u vrijednosnom sustavu umjetnosti” [Evil in Art’s Value System], in: Hermann Broch, *Duh i duh vremena*, p. 33.

8

Ibid., p. 38.

Brotherhood and kitsch

In developing a theory of kitsch in its most glorious and most massive showing inside a system, Kundera is often talking about the First of May festival. Smiles, delightful and true joy are public ways of conformation of the categorical agreement with being.⁹ Yet, it is still not only about the First of May and communism. The same behaviour Sabina experienced when she moved to America. Some senator was driving her in his car, with his children sitting on rear seats. When he parked his car in front of the school, the children ran out over some green field toward it. Then he turned to Sabina and said, with a smile on his face, that this is happiness. This same type of smile Sabina saw on the First of May back in the Czech Republic.¹⁰ Kundera judges the senator and asks from where does he get his belief that this is happiness? He ends that there is only one argument in confirming senator's beliefs: his own feeling towards his children. The purpose of this small story is to show that kitsch doesn't only rule in communism, but also in other, more modern and democratic societies "where the imperatives of mass culture compromise private life and discount genuine individuality."¹¹

Kundera puts it: "When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme. The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitudes can share."¹² Kundera continues in developing one of his central places about kitsch, saying that kitsch is based on everyday, regular situations and emotions that are known to everybody. It is about lies which basic human phenomena as love, pain, birth and death turn into untrue emotion or hedonistic joke.¹³ Kundera describes it in his own style: "Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch."¹⁴ And now comes the conclusion that is most valuable to our investigation of kitsch: "The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch."¹⁵ An example for Kundera is the behaviour of politicians that as soon as they see a journalist they run and grab some child and kiss it: "Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements."¹⁶

Yet, Kundera admits that in democratic societies, where there are many political parties, they influence one another and restrain their dominance and that can be some chance for avoiding kitsch and "... the individual can preserve his individuality; the artist can create unusual works."¹⁷ But whenever a single political movement is in power all the time Kundera claims that then we find ourselves in a totalitarian kitsch. It is interesting that beside communism, which is Kundera's main motive, also fascism and Nazism had a strongly bad taste for art.¹⁸

Further on, Kundera claims that the source of kitsch is the already mentioned categorical agreement with being. But, the different basic ground (God, men, love, fight...) for building up beliefs about the world defines the tonality of kitsch. Depending on how somebody answers the question how is the world created, a different type of kitsch is borne: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Communist, Fascist, democratic, feminist, European, American, national or International.¹⁹ Kitsch is a tool of governing people under a regime, whose societies aren't built on *ratio*, but on words, pictures, and archetypes, which are produced by this or that political kitsch.²⁰ An individual that does not follow the kitsch of political socialites soon finds himself in a gulag – which is seen

by Kundera as a septic hole where totalitarian kitsch throws garbage. Without false pretension, gulag means death.

The Great Marsh as pure emanation of “the they”

In this section we will examine Heidegger’s phenomenon of “the they”. We can notice it in everydayness, in our most normal behaviours. “The they” is showing its face in human relations. This kind of everydayness was always discarded by philosophy as something worthless. And because of that most of people did not have a thinking way of dealing and understanding it. So Heidegger ends that what is ontically “closes” to itself is also ontologically farthest.²¹ Precisely in this everydayness Heidegger sees the prior structure of existentiality, in which we are directly connected to the phenomenon of forgetting.

“Dasein’s average everydayness, however, is not to be taken as a mere ‘aspect’. Here too, and even in the mode of inauthenticity, the structure of existentiality lies a priori. And here too Dasein’s Being is an issue for it in a definite way; and Dasein comports itself towards it in the mode of average everydayness, even if this is only the mode of fleeing in the face of it and forgetfulness thereof.”²²

When Heidegger uses ‘forgetfulness’ it is pointed toward the forgetting of Being. But if an individual forgets Being, can we say that he also forgets himself? How is this forgetfulness possible?

Heidegger claims that Dasein is thrown into everydayness. What he meets in it are Others, who are also in the world, together. That Dasein and Others share the world together Heidegger calls Being-with. Yet, there is a certain distanciality (*Abständigkeit*) between Dasein and Others: everybody cares how one differs from them (to be evened out; or one’s own Dasein has lagged behind the Others and wants to catch up; or one’s Dasein has some priority over them).²³ “It itself is not; its Being has been taken away by the Others. Dasein’s everyday possibilities of Being are for the Others to dispose of as they please.”²⁴

9
M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 295.

10
Ibid., p. 296.

11
Roger Kimball, “The Ambiguities of Milan Kundera”, in: Harold Bloom (ed.), *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Milan Kundera*, Chelsea House Pub., Broomall 2003, pp. 33–47, here p. 35.

12
M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 297.

13
G. Dorfles (ed.), *Kič – antologija lošeg ukusa*, p. 48.

14
M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 297.

15
Ibid.

16
Ibid., p. 298.

17
Ibid.

18
G. Dorfles (ed.), *Kič – antologija lošeg ukusa*, p. 52.

19
M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 305.

20
Ibid.

21
Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (trans.) John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 1962, p. 37.

22
Ibid., p. 69.

23
Ibid., p. 163–164.

24
Ibid.

Others are in charge of everydayness. “What is decisive is just that inconspicuous domination by Others which has already been taken over unawares from Dasein as Being-with.”²⁵ Others are not named, everybody and nobody can be Others. The ‘who’ of Others Heidegger names *das Man* (“the they”).

“The they” in a manner that is unnoticeable to individuals’ dictates behaviour of Other: the way someone thinks, someone behaves, the way you do this and that...²⁶ The pressure of Others is also unnoticeable, until the individual starts asking questions. The way how “the they” dominate is through “the everyday kind of Being of discourse, sight, and interpretation.”²⁷ Heidegger names three phenomena to explore this domination: idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. What is here important to notice is that Heidegger does not want to moralize, but to give an interpretation which has a purely ontological purpose. So we have here a different approach than that with Kundera, where the purpose of theory of kitsch is to show who is and in what way guilty of the crimes of communists. Why does Kundera do this is clear – he also had to run away from Czech Republic to France.

Idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity

Idle talk (*Gerede*) is a positive phenomenon which constitutes understanding and interpreting in everydayness. Being-said is some kind of understanding of the thing itself but also “there is hidden way in which the understanding of Dasein has been interpreted.”²⁸ That what is said-in-the-talk is understood, but the one that talks is not necessarily looking at what is he talking about, most often he is not even close to it. That is why said-in-the-talk is only approximately and superficially understood. What is behind this kind of talk is averageness and because it “we have a common understanding of what is said.”²⁹ Now we can see the point of idle talk: the being we are talking about is not at all in a genuine way understood (from primordial sources), but through gossip.

“What is said-in-the-talk as such, spreads in wider circles and takes on an authoritative character. Things are so because one says so. Idle talk is constituted by just such gossiping and passing the word along a process by which its initial lack of grounds to stand on (*Bodenständigkeit*) becomes aggravated to complete groundlessness (*Bodenlosigkeit*).”³⁰

The second phenomena – curiosity, seeks some object, but not to know it and understand it, but just to see it.³¹

Idle talk and curiosity go together, as one pulling the other. Inasmuch everything is accessible to everybody through curiosity and then when everything is understood by idle talk, a third phenomenon is borne – ambiguity. The real power of ambiguity is that she fools Dasein in thinking that he understands authentic way of being and that there is no need to question it again.³²

Now we have come to the front doors of a fundamental phenomenon of everydayness: the falling (*Das Verfallen*).

“This term does not express any negative evaluation, but is used to signify that Dasein is proximally and for the most part alongside the ‘world’ of its concern. This “absorption in ...” (*Aufgehen bei...*) has mostly the character of Being-lost in the publicness of the ‘they’. Dasein has, in the first instance, fallen away (*abgefallen*) from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being its Self, and has fallen into the ‘world’. ‘Fallenness’ into the ‘world’ means an absorption in Being-with-one-another, in so far as the latter is guided by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity.”³³

“The they” make sure that Dasein lives his life with full lungs and in that way that he is calm about his days on earth. Falling expresses a mode of inauthen-

ticity, and so falling is for Heidegger a definite existential characteristic of Dasein itself.³⁴ On the contrary, authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit* – being proper to one; *eigen* – Heidegger uses to refer to the irreducible singularity of life) has a possibility of developing and realizing the wholeness of the individual. Inauthenticity and authenticity are two modes of structure of the being of the there-being. So, in an inauthentic life small and meaningless types of forgetting are realized through understanding of the world the way Others say it is – that is on a mode of groundless floating, but it is the same case in concerning self-understanding of humans – which for Heidegger is in direct link with oblivion of Being. These inauthentic answers of life that we endorse give birth to forgetting of the primal source and build a wall over which it is impossible for the individual to pass and to understand his own potentiality-for-Being. The chance for breaking the wall is born from death, which is for Heidegger a chance for the individual. Death will be discussed further in the text.

Kitsch and Others – an example from Tomas' life

Now we shall combine some aspects of theory of kitsch and some of theory of falling. In plain words, we will put some meat from Kundera's novel on the skeleton of Heidegger's existential analysis. Is there a fundamental crossing point of these two theories? We shall answer affirmatively and say: everydayness and public opinion. Kitsch and Others are at work in the life of every individual, in all types of socialites. Our example from Tomas' life brings us to the moment when the headmaster of hospital, where Tomas works as a doctor, asked from him to sign a retraction of his newspaper comment³⁵ published some time ago in a very popular anti-communist newspaper. Unless Tomas signed, clearly he will lose his job. In what we are interested here is the way people around Tomas reacted when they found out that he has been given a choice.

First, it is interesting to point out that Others said about Tomas that he was the best surgeon. Second, Others believed that he will be next head of department

25

Ibid.

26

Ibid.

27

Ibid., p. 211.

28

Ibid.

29

Ibid., p. 212.

30

Ibid.

31

Ibid., p. 216.

32

M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 218.

33

Ibid., p. 220. If we want to put falling into a bigger frame of *Being and Time*, then we

must mention care (*Die Sorge*) that unifies Dasein's three central features: facticity (*Schon-sein-in-der-Welt*), existentiality (*Sich-vorweg-sein*) and falling (*Sein-bei*).

34

Ibid., p. 220.

35

Tomas was inspired by Sophocles' Oedipus who didn't know that he was sleeping with his mother and when he found it out he ripped his eyes out and left from Thebe. Tomas concluded from the story: even though Oedipus didn't know it, he punished himself for the wrongdoing. He used this idea in his comment to give an answer to the question that was troubling his society: were communists innocent because they didn't know about the regimes' mass murders? Tomas answer was clear: they were guilty. M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 64.

in hospital, because the chief surgeon was getting on towards retirement age. The third thing said, when the word broke out that he has been given a choice is that he will definitely sign it. It is very clear that Others have already made a decision, under the influence of the moral of totalitarian kitsch which throws into gulag those who do not conform to the regime. Signature means life, the absence of it means death. Death is behind the moral of totalitarian kitsch.

Tomas was deeply surprised when he heard the rumours: he was shocked that Others believed he would rather do something dishonest than something honest.³⁶ That which is troubling Tomas is in fact the Heideggerian notion of idle talk. In the centre of gossip is not what it is about (Tomas with his moral behaviour and acts until the moment), but a prejudice that is taken to be a sure fact. Also, when Others made their decision, with a smile toward Tomas on their faces, they behaved according to it. So Kundera divides them into two types. One group of them smiled to Tomas because they or someone they closely knew were (or are prepared) in the same situation to make public peace with the occupation regime.

“These people began to smile a curious smile at him, a smile he had never seen before: the sheepish smile of secret conspiratorial consent. (...) His supposed acceptance of the chief surgeon’s proposal was therefore further proof that cowardice was slowly but surely becoming the norm of behavior and would soon cease being taken for what it actually was.”³⁷

Now it has become clear that Others, under the moral of totalitarian kitsch, decide what norm of behaviour is good for society. If kitsch is controlled and used by politicians to model the behaviour of people, then kitsch shows itself in a function of modelling moral norms.

The second type of reaction came from people that themselves or someone close to them refused to make public peace with the occupation regime or were convinced that they would not do it. They smiled at Tomas from a position of moral supremacy. And we come to the central point in Tomas’ conclusion:

“And suddenly Tomas grasped a strange fact: everyone was smiling at him, everyone wanted him to write the retraction; it would make everyone happy! The people with the first type of reaction would be happy because by inflating cowardice, he would make their actions seem commonplace and thereby give them back their lost honor. The people with the second type of reaction, who had come to consider their honor a special privilege never to be yielded, nurtured a secret love for the cowards, for without them their courage would soon erode into a trivial, monotonous grind admired by no one.”³⁸

These reactions also lead us toward Heidegger’s description of everydayness with Others – everybody knows what others should and will do. Tomas feels himself exposed to the public and knows what Others think. People talk to Tomas about signing not because they want to know what he will do, but because of curiosity. And we are again with Heidegger’s different phenomena of falling, which only want to see, but not to understand fully what is really going on.³⁹ That what the Others have concluded in a way of ambiguity, that Tomas will sign the confession (though the conclusion came from different motives), will not matter when it happens because it was already figured out. A search for a new victim will start, so that moral norms of kitsch could spread. Let’s just mention that after some thinking Tomas decided not to sign and soon lost his job. The society put him on the margin, very close to gulag, because they were still hoping that he would sign it. First he worked in a stationary far away from Prague, then as a window washer and finally as a driver in a village community. Only when Tomas reached the bottom of society, the regime lost interest in him and his confession.

Let us end: Heidegger's notion of falling and inauthentic living is showing itself in Kundera's novel through moral corrosion of society. When Heidegger speaks of falling and the individual that has always some decisions to make, we can also see Kundera's heroes who have new decisions to make on an everyday basis. One takes the answers that are given to them, but others start searching. Heidegger's Others are Kundera's public. The way that "the they" runs everydayness, is the same as the way blind nations follow the political regime and its moral standards every day. While the individual thinks the way "the they" thinks, s/he can enjoy the society and other members of it. Contrary, s/he will find him/herself on the margin of society, near gulag. Others or "the they" rule for Heidegger with everydayness and for Kundera the public, regime, and kitsch. Yet, the question arises: why does an individual passively accept domination of Others and follows rules of kitsch? Now, we are going to look at the way kitsch functions on an individual level.

Tomas, Tereza and Sabina: birth of forgetting caused by fear of death

Tomas'⁴⁰ and Tereza's⁴¹ relationship was born out of six accidental circumstances. At the very beginning of their relation, after they made love for the first time, Tomas was lying next to Tereza who was sleeping and he tried to calm and slow her breathing. And then into his mind entered a thought, which was at first sight totally unimportant.

"And all at once he fancied she had been with him for many years and was dying. He had a sudden clear feeling that he would not survive her death. He would lie down beside her and want to die with her. He pressed his face into the pillow beside her head and kept it there for a long time."⁴²

Tomas' desire toward other women will not weaken, but this thought would not let him separate from Tereza. How is this ambiguity possible: adultery and having a fear of death for a loved one? In what kind of relation are they? But, if death is in question, then where is kitsch to hide it, with the help of forgetting?

Relations with other women would at the end turn out into parody which will reach its peak when Tomas had a couple of mistresses per day, until the moment when he became tired of such a life, pressed by guilt for cheating Tereza. Kundera will see Tomas' adultery as a desire to discover in each woman that which makes her different from other women – it is a small, one millionth fragment that does not become obvious so easily. When he was working as a doctor, and much more when he was working as a window washer, he spent a lot of time with his mistress and not with Tereza. He was living lightness of

³⁶
Ibid., p. 66.

³⁷
Ibid.

³⁸
Ibid., p. 66.

³⁹
For example we can use young doctor that approached Tomas. Ibid.

⁴⁰
More about Tomas and his life see in: M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 14. For why is Tomas born from the statement: "Einmal ist keinmal!" and "Es muss sein!" see in: Ibid., p. 4, 15.

⁴¹
More about why is Tereza for Kundera born from the rumbling of a stomach see in: Ibid., p. 15.

⁴²
Ibid., p. 12.

life⁴³ in which tricks and guilt rules, putting aside the burden which knowledge of mortality of a loved one carries. Lightness, through adultery, for Tomas enables the forgetting of death: firstly of Tereza, but much deeper, also his own death. Levinas says: Death of other is first death.⁴⁴

But, if death is forgotten in life, then she will have, with help of Kundera, “its five minutes of glory” through dream. The biggest harassment which is caused by guilt are Tereza’s dreams, which she regularly reports to Tomas. In them, Tomas is about to kill her (dream of dancing around the pull) or she is already dead but can still feel (when she is lying dead with another woman and needs to urinate; or when she is buried alive...). These dreams make Tomas feel guilty. In that way, Kundera keeps the smell of death always near Tomas and his lightness of life.

Now we will look at one of Tereza’s dreams, which in its amount of fear is for Kundera almost the same as Sabina’s fear of kitsch.⁴⁵ Tereza is dancing around a pool with other naked women and is forced to sing happy songs. In the pool are dead bodies of other women which Tomas killed with a gun from a basket over the pool, from where he gave orders. Those who do not listen to him get killed and women are not allowed to talk to each other. “Tereza’s dream reveals the true function of kitsch: kitsch is a folding screen set up to curtain off death.”⁴⁶ Who does not play by the rules, gets killed. We can see here that kitsch (dancing and singing by the rules as in celebration of the First of May) is born because of the fear of death. After some time, during dancing and singing in our life under the regime, we forget about the threat of death.

Now we will turn to Sabina, who is a very close friend and mistress of Tomas. “The reason I like you, she would say to him, is you’re the complete opposite of kitsch. In the kingdom of kitsch you would be a monster.”⁴⁷ Tomas did not find compassion of Sabina for his way of life in his other mistresses. But why would he be a monster? Sabina is talking about moral judgement of his behaviour in a world that is guided from the start by Genesis. But, is Sabina right? Is Tomas total opposite of kitsch and his behaviour and adultery is not kitsch? Somehow we have to doubt it, because Sabina is in need of Tomas. She, who is Kundera’s number one fighter against kitsch, needs to see him as the total opposite of kitsch – because she is living similar to him.

Sabina⁴⁸ is an artist and can easily recognize kitsch. She fears not so much the regime, but the regime’s dream of society coming through to reality. The question is: is Sabina also, like all people in Kundera’s novel, under the influence of kitsch?⁴⁹ Kundera doesn’t miss to answer it. The scene is: Sabina has finished with her artwork and was leaving her art studio when she spotted across the green yard a white wooden house with lights in windows. She was touched: “All her life she had proclaimed kitsch her enemy. But hadn’t she in fact been carrying it with her? Her kitsch was her image of home, all peace, quiet, and harmony, and ruled by a loving mother and wise father. It was an image that took shape within her after the death of her parents. The less her life resembled that sweetest of dreams, the more sensitive she was to its magic, and more than once she shed tears when the ungrateful daughter in a sentimental film embraced the neglected father as the windows of the happy family’s house shone out into the dying day.”⁵⁰ It is not irrelevant that Kundera here uses pictures and sweet dreams as something to describe kitsch.⁵¹ So, to Sabina the artist, the treatment of kitsch comes from the same place as her inspiration – from imagination.

But, Sabina very quickly becomes aware of kitsch. She has the insight into kitsch as parody of catharsis and neutralization of real feelings with help of

imaginative ones.⁵² So kitsch comes to Sabina only occasionally and she will not live it because she knows it is a lie. What happens when she realizes that it is kitsch?

“As soon as kitsch is recognized for the lie it is, it moves into the context of non-kitsch, thus losing its authoritarian power and becoming as touching as any other human weakness. For none among us is superman enough to escape kitsch completely. No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition.”⁵³

Kitsch that Sabina cannot erase is born out of death of her parents. So once more we find death behind kitsch. Let us also mention here Sabina’s dream of cemetery and fear that she will be buried on an American one, where they put heavy stones on graves. She is scared because she has a nostalgic memory of an old Czech cemetery where they put just land.⁵⁴ This image of a peaceful last resort, also like one of home, is pure kitsch. So Sabina wrote in her testimony that she wants to be cremated.⁵⁵ If Sabina was, for her whole life, fighting kitsch as a free artist against different kind of social regimes, even now, in the face of death, she stands free and in truth. Her final destination is absolute freedom⁵⁶ from an emotion of fear of death and kitsch.

The individual and death in Heidegger

Let us now look at relation of death and individual with Heidegger. According to him, the dying of others we do not experience, but are at most only

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With question of weight or lightness of life Kundera started his novel and it will appear many times through the novel. M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 3.

44

Emmanuel Levinas, *Dieu, la Mort et le Temps*, Grasset, Paris 1993, p. 53, also in: Ante Vučković, “Smislenost smrti” [Meaningfulness of Death], *Crkva u svijetu* 33 (1/1998), pp. 30–52, here p. 47.

45

We shall not investigate in this work the following notion: in Teresa’s life we can also find examples of totalitarian kitsch in the description of her mother. More in: J. S. Hans, “Kundera’s Laws of Beauty”, p. 85.

46

M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 94.

47

Ibid., p. 6.

48

More about Sabina and how her fight against kitsch started, see in: *Ibid.*, p. 92.

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For Dorfles kitsch belongs to all artistic stiles and ways of human expression. G. Dorfles (ed.), *Kič – antologija lošeg ukusa*, p. 35. Further on, for Giesz there is no artwork that can resist kitsch assimilation only with its objec-

tive aesthetic qualities. L. Giesz, “Kič čovjek kao turist”, p. 170.

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M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 95.

51

Relation of dream and art was analysed by Broch. H. Broch, “Zlo u vrijednosnom sustavu umjetnosti”, p. 37.

52

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1984, p. 340. Also in: Jolanta W. Wawrzycka, “Betrayal as a Flight from Kitsch in Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*”, in: Aron Aji (ed.), *Milan Kundera and the Art of Fiction*, Routledge, New York 1992, pp. 267–280, here p. 274.

53

M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 95.

54

Ibid., p. 54.

55

Ibid., p. 101.

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J. W. Wawrzycka, “Betrayal as a Flight from Kitsch in Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*”, p. 278.

present.⁵⁷ So Tomas continues with his kitsch behaviour to keep at distance the possibility of Tereza's death. His behaviour is in coherence with his attitude towards death that we find at the very beginning of the West. It is about Epicures and his opinion that death is outside life and we must do everything in our power to eliminate the fear of death, which is an obstacle of good life.⁵⁸ For Heidegger the search of Being-a-whole, which is possible, also demands consideration of neglected phenomena. "In the centre of these considerations we have the task of characterizing ontologically Dasein's Being-at-an-end and of achieving an existential conception of death."⁵⁹

When the individual is near death, he treats him/herself as a special possibility and has a chance of wholeness. Wholeness is a horizon in which other possibilities open to the individual and give him/her meaning.

"Dasein can be whole and so also authentic, insofar as s/he lives his/her Being toward death with an anticipation of death."⁶⁰ But the question arises itself: if everydayness is under the influence of the 'they', how does then Dasein understand death and how does s/he treat her? The public has a way with death – it treats it as something common, something that happens when someone close to us or far away from us dies. Death is an event that happens inside the world and as that death stays as something regular and normal as other everyday things we meet. "The 'they' has already stowed away (*gesichert*) an interpretation for this event. It talks of it in a 'fugitive' manner, either expressly or else in a way which is mostly inhibited, as if to say, 'One of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us'."⁶¹ "The they" never die, as also I. So "the they" and myself are always calm about death. This public understanding of death (*öffentliche Ausgelegtheit*) controls the way someone thinks about death and which opinion is the proper one.⁶² "The they" even "often still keep talking the 'dying person' into the belief that he will escape death and soon return to the tranquilized everydayness of the world of his concern."⁶³ "The they" must keep everything settled about death – it is a constant tranquilization of death.⁶⁴ This behaviour of Being toward death Heidegger calls 'falling'. As falling, everyday Being-towards-death is a constant "fleeing in the face of death."⁶⁵

This fleeing is trying to evade the fear of the face of death. The reason is that when Dasein is confronted with death, anxiety is born. An anxiety experienced by Tereza, Tomas and Sabina. Anxiety is for Heidegger a basic mood in which the individual gains distance from the world and becomes self-aware. In anxiety forgetting is banished and freedom toward wholeness is possible. The face of death "as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's own most possibility – non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped."⁶⁶

But, in everydayness Dasein is in constant running away from death. "The anxiety which has been made ambiguous as fear, is passed off as a weakness with which no self-assured Dasein may have any acquaintance..."⁶⁷ His/her running away or fleeing is possible on the ground of forgetting, which is produced by idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity about death. The phenomenon of forgetting is letting Dasein to escape the memory of face of death.

Conclusion

"We must forget, suppress, bury death, lock in the deepest tombs, darkest rooms of memory. Let it die there until it resurrects in the end of its own life. The wanted death is a sudden death. Death without dying. Death without any thought of death. This death, in which we want forgetting of our own total and absolute end, is a radical and normal case of wishing for our own death. If you cannot move away death, at least you can remove dying."⁶⁸

That is how Beck describes the answer of the Modernity to the question of death, but also it is in the Modernity that the term of ‘kitsch’ was born. Kundera, now in some time distance from making *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, holds that the phenomenon can be spotted in its horror only when it starts to appear. But, as soon as it gets his presence Kundera claims it becomes something that is natural, which we are aware of from the beginning of our life and something that we do not question and something that doesn’t surprise us. “We are surrounded by kitsch. Kitsch is everywhere: television, newspapers, our private lives, politics. Even war is presented as kitsch. (Look how they write about Sarajevo!).”⁶⁹

In this work we have showed how kitsch is recognized as a curtain that covers the face of death: it is death that comes from the regime or it is our own death. Death has become a regular friend of kitsch, while before it was a friend of art. Today we have an ever present phenomenon of “ugly deaths”, when over-affecting and luscious emotions of kitsch rule, with a veil of sentiment and pathos. “Death is redesigned as life, hidden, spurious, and masked.”⁷⁰ Death that was some time ago respected and studied is now stiffed, mimetic, and above all – counterfeit.⁷¹ Kitsch has become a weapon that commercial lobbies and political parties use to gain control over basic human needs.⁷²

For Kundera the true enemies of life are not death and laws, but kitsch and politicians.⁷³ What matters is how someone uses kitsch.⁷⁴ The reason why kitsch is so popular and spreads so easily is – because it is easily enjoyable. In kitsch there is no pressure and working in, let us say: observation of masterpieces of art or in inheriting norms of society. It is easier to turn to kitsch than

57

M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 281.

58

More about it in: Epicuro, *Epistola a Meneceo*, in: Giovanni Realle, *Storia della filosofia antica III*, Milano 1976, p. 253, also in: A. Vučković, “Smislenost smrti”, p. 33.

59

M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 280–281.

60

A. Vučković, “Smislenost smrti”, p. 38.

61

M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 297.

62

Martin Heidegger, *Prolegomena za povijest pojma vremena*, Demetra, Zagreb 2000, p. 368. (Original in German: Martin Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*, GA 20, Klostermann Vittorio GmbH, Frankfurt am. Main 1979, p. 386.)

63

M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 297.

64

Ibid., p. 298.

65

Ibid.

66

Ibid., p. 303.

67

M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 298.

68

Ulrich Beck, “Eigenes Leben, eigener Tod”, in: *Der Tod*, Reiner Beck, München 1995, p. 254, also in: A. Vučković, “Smislenost smrti”, p. 33.

69

Milan Kundera, “Afterword”, in: Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 2002.

70

G. Dorfles (ed.), *Kič – antologija lošeg ukusa*, p. 135.

71

Ibid.

72

John Bayley, “Kundera and Kitsch”, in: Harold Bloom (ed.), *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Milan Kundera*, Chelsea House Pub., Broomall 2003, pp. 19–27, here p. 25.

73

Ibid., p. 26.

74

R. Kimball, “The Ambiguities of Milan Kundera”, p. 42.

it is to take a stand against it.⁷⁵ *Verkitschung* (to make something as kitsch) has become a style of our age.⁷⁶

In analysing Heidegger's "the they" we have seen that the individual can, in the possibility of his death, discover a path back to himself and be aware of illusions that Other put on him. "In expecting death the individual discovers himself as independent of Others and he is possible to become free of all determinations that come from outside."⁷⁷ Inauthentic life is the most ordinary life we meet, in which an individual runs from the face of death into oblivion that is offered by everydayness.

Heidegger and theorists of art which we met in our work see in the possibility of death liberation of the highest instance or value. "Since it is not only about the moment of death, but also a way of existence, there is a possibility of lightening and reasoning the way man is capable of waking up from his dream in everydayness and deciding to a make shift towards a heroic and decisive way of living."⁷⁸ Value systems that we have encountered, when we were talking about Kundera's kitsch or Heidegger's Others and "the they", depended on the fear of death. It is because value systems want to transmit a message about the safety of human existence and to offer salvation from the threat of the dark.⁷⁹ That is why we all agree too easily with the categorical agreement with being and listen to it when we hear commands how we should live our lives.

Now we can make our final conclusion: the phenomenon that arises from covering up the unforgettable moment of possibility of death and makes possible the domination of kitsch and "the they" is the phenomenon of forgetting. Birth of forgetting allows removing death from horizon in personal life and in societies.

Forgetting is now beginning to show itself to us like one of the most fundamental moments in the ground of our everydayness in which humans make their decisions and direct their lives. With this work we have only managed to direct our attention to the existence of the phenomenon of forgetting and to warn about the necessity of further development on the topic, so we would not forget forgetting. The questions that remained unanswered are: why Kundera and Heidegger did not notice the phenomenon of forgetting as a decisive moment; what about the relation between forgetting and time; how much must an individual and a society be aware of forgetting?

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Saša Horvat

Zaborav u temelju propadanja i kiča kod Heideggera i Kundera

Sažetak

U ovome radu nastojat ćemo analizirati odnos između fenomena kiča i fenomena propadanja (Das Verfallen) i na temelju toga fenomen zaborava u svakidašnjici ljudskoga života. Fenomen kiča analizirat ćemo kroz djelo književnika Milana Kundera (1929.–) i njegova romana Nepodnošljiva lakoća postojanja (1984.). Nastojat ćemo pokazati, pomoću komparativne i sintetičke metode, da Kunderin stav o kiču kao fenomenu koji pridonosi zaboravu lica smrti dobiva svoju filozofsku potvrdu u fenomenu propadanja kojeg je uveo Martin Heidegger (1889.–1976.) u djelu Bitak i vrijeme (1927.). Konačno, pokušat ćemo kroz navedene fenomene izložiti, s jedne strane, veze i međudnose umjetničkog djela poput romana i filozofskog sistema. S druge strane, nastojat ćemo obrazložiti da je fenomen koji se probija u prvi plan kroz kič i propadanje fenomen zaborava smrti. Ukoliko su kič i propadanje nešto najbližije u ljudskom životu, kao što Heidegger i Kundera tvrde, ključno pitanje ovog istraživanja samo se nameće: je li zaborav smrti temeljni moment svakidašnjice?

Ključne riječi

zaborav, smrt, kič, propadanje, svakidašnjica, Martin Heidegger, Milan Kundera

Saša Horvat

Vergessenheit im Boden des Verfallens und Kitsches bei Heidegger und Kundera

Zusammenfassung

In der vorgelegten Abhandlung machen wir den Versuch, den Nexus zwischen dem Phänomen des Kitsches und dem Phänomen des Verfallens zu analysieren und aufgrund dessen das Phänomen des Vergessens in der Alltäglichkeit des menschlichen Lebens. Wir erforschen das Phänomen des Kitsches durch das Werk des Romanautors Milan Kundera (1929.–), und zwar in seinem Roman Die unerträgliche Leichtigkeit des Seins (1984). Wir befeßigen uns, mithilfe der

75

Clement Greenberg, "Avangarda i kič" [Avant-garde and Kitsch], in: G. Dorfles (ed.), *Kič – antologija lošeg ukusa*, p. 121.

76

Karl Pawek, "Kršćanski kič" [Christian Kitsch], in: G. Dorfles (ed.), *Kič – antologija lošeg ukusa*, p. 144.

77

Ante Vučković, "Smislenost smrti", p. 38.

78

Ibid., p. 41.

79

G. Dorfles (ed.), *Kič – antologija lošeg ukusa*, p. 82.

vergleichenden und synthetischen Methode darzulegen, dass Kunderas Befinden des Kitsches als Phänomen, welches das Vergessenwerden vom Antlitz des Todes fördert, seine Bestätigung im Phänomen der Verfallenheit findet, das von Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) in dessen Werk Sein und Zeit (1927) introduziert wurde. Abschließend versuchen wir einesteils, durch genannte Phänomene Verbindungen und Wechselbeziehungen zwischen einem Kunstwerk wie Roman und dem philosophischen System zu erläutern. Andernteils geben wir uns die Mühe zu fundieren, dass das durch Kitsch und Verfallenheit in den Vordergrund tretende Phänomen realiter sich als Phänomen der Todesvergessenheit erzeugt. Falls Kitsch und Verfallen jenes sind, was dem menschlichen Leben engstens nahesteht – wie von Heidegger und Kundera postuliert – wirft sich die Leitfrage unserer Ausführungen vor uns auf: Ist die Todesvergessenheit das ausschlaggebende Moment des Alltäglichs?

Schlüsselwörter

Vergessenheit, Tod, Kitsch, Verfallen, Alltäglichkeit, Martin Heidegger, Milan Kundera

Saša Horvat

**L'oubli dans le fondement de la déchéance et du kitsch
chez Heidegger et Kundera**

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous tâcherons d'analyser la relation entre le phénomène de kitsch et celui de déchéance (Das Verfallen) puis, en conséquence, le phénomène d'oubli dans la vie quotidienne de l'homme. Nous analyserons le phénomène de kitsch à travers l'œuvre du romancier Milan Kundera (1929–) et son roman L'Insoutenable légèreté de l'être (1984). Nous essaierons de montrer, à l'aide de la méthode de comparaison et de synthèse, que la position de Kundera sur le kitsch, en tant que phénomène qui aide à oublier la face de la mort, trouve sa confirmation philosophique dans le phénomène de déchéance introduit par Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) dans L'Etre et le temps. Enfin, nous essaierons d'expliquer à travers lesdits phénomènes, d'une part, les liens et les interrelations d'une œuvre d'art telle que le roman et un système philosophique. D'autre part, nous tenterons de montrer que le phénomène qui se produit à travers le kitsch et la déchéance est celui de l'oubli de la mort. Si, comme l'affirment Heidegger et Kundera, le kitsch et la déchéance sont ce qu'il y a de plus proche dans la vie de l'homme, la question clé de notre examen s'impose toute seule : l'oubli de la mort est-il un moment fondamental du quotidien ?

Mots-clés

oubli, mort, kitsch, déchéance, quotidien, Martin Heidegger, Milan Kundera